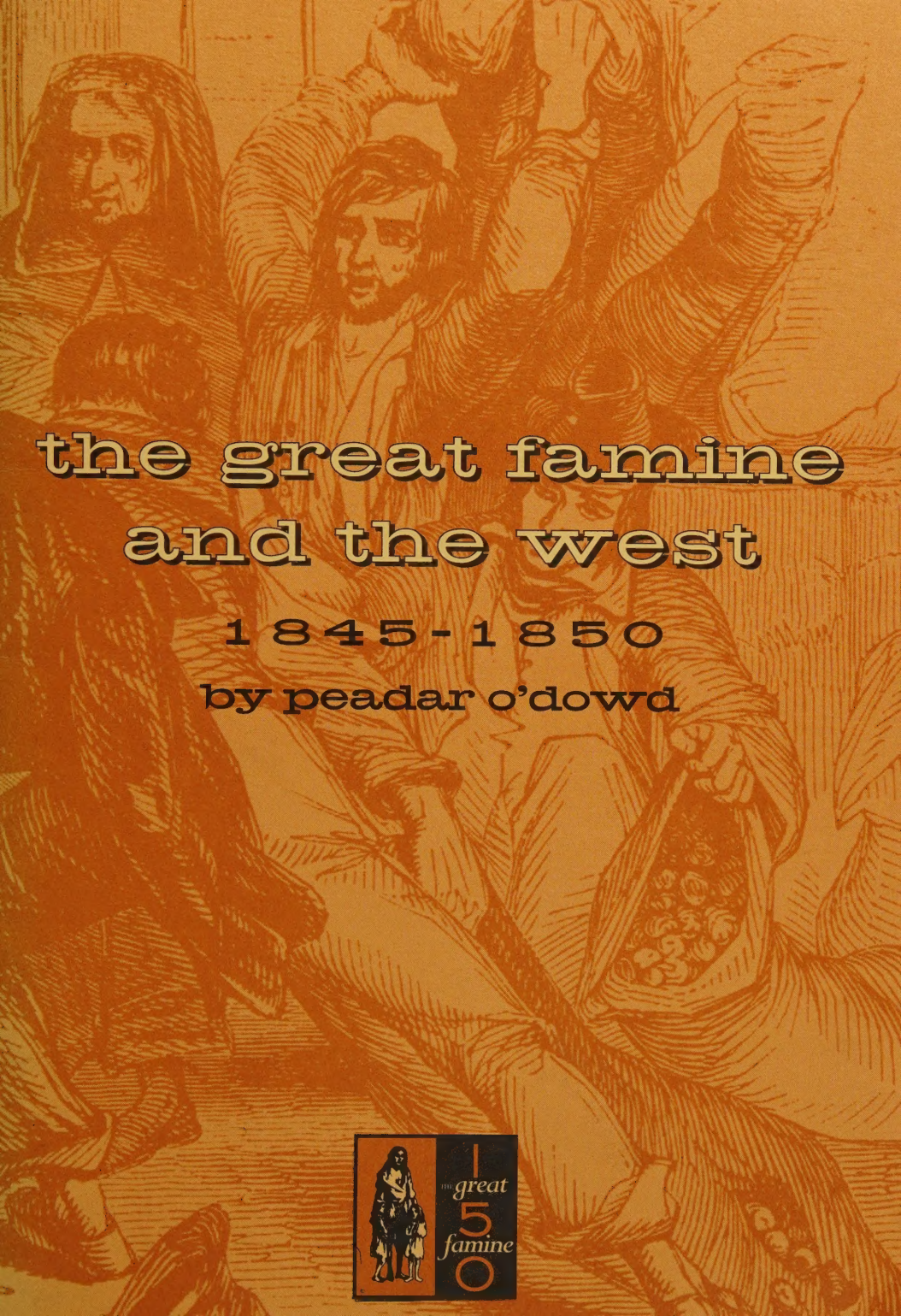

the great famine and the west

1845-1850

by peadar o'dowd

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and PEADAR O'DOWD,
Historian/Lecturer

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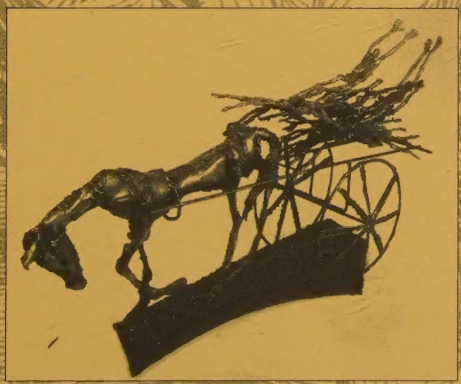


"Famine Cart" by John Behan

Attack on a Potato Store, Galway, 1842 *(Illustrated London News)*

INTRODUCTION

In dealing with the Great Famine, the worst natural disaster ever visited on the Irish people, perhaps the following words, in an article on Swinford Workhouse by Rev. Fr. Martin Jennings, best sum up that terrible period of a century and half ago:

"In this breath of history we witness the 'heavy visitation of providence ordained for this country, the complacency of politicians and officials amid the foreboding and inadequancy of contingency measures.' We see too the origins of much present-day local administration and social welfare procedures and above all we see a lasting experience deeply and permanently engraved on a people's memory and emotion."

OTHER FAMINES

The Great Famine of 1845-50 was not, of course, the first of its type, and other food shortages were recorded during 1739-41, 1816-17, 1822 and 1831. They occured in an Ireland suffering the effects of the Penal Laws, which saw the vast majority of the population become tenants in their own land. Food shortages also occured in 1842 resulting in food riots in Galway city, leading to further disturbances during the Great Famine. These occured when local milling establishments such as Regan's exported 1,000 cwt. of oatmeal to Liverpool in February, 1846 through the new Galway port.

LAND DIVISIONS

As the 18th century gave way to the 19th, a rigid division in land tenure was imposed on the Irish countryside. At the top of the social pyramid were English and Anglo-Irish families, the Protestant Asendancy class, often living a life of luxury in the 'Big House' on substantial estates such as Lord Clanricarde of Portumna in south-east Galway. Next came the large tenant-farmer, usually acting as estate agents in the West, who let portions of the estate to small farmers, and vast portions of the rougher more marginal sections to the lowest grade of tenant-farmers known as cottiers. Thus, the vast majority of Western land workers occupied very small holdings, and the thousands living mainly in the Atlantic counties often had to farm very small plots of rough land on rocky inlets. At the time, sixty three per cent of Connacht's farms contained less than five acres, due to sub-division among large families resulting from early marriages and from living in the clachan type of native village cluster using the rundale system of farming.

THE POTATO

This fragile way of life of the vast amount of Western farmers depended and even thrived during the turn of the 18-19th centuries on a cheap and plentiful food supply based on the potato. The population increased from three million in 1800 to

The Potato Plant

eight million in 1845 due mainly to this easily grown, vitamin-packed food source, which found the Irish climate and soil ideal to its cultivation. An acre and a half of land would feed five or six people for six months and, once the lazy-beds were planted with seed potatoes, the cottier could devote the rest of the time working for 'his rent'.

BEFORE THE GREAT FAMINE

Work, in all its aspects, was plentiful as the 18th century drew to a close. The Irish Parliament, set up in 1782 by the powerful Irish Ascendancy class, passed laws encouraging and protecting the Irish economy. Even after the Act of Union in 1800, trade flourished initially and by 1810 Irish exports of grain, meat, butter and cloth fluctuated between £2 and £6 million a year. However, the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1814, saw economic collapse in Europe and a fall in demand for Irish agricultural products, especially grain. A decline in the demand for intensive tillage farming followed and a return to grasing ensued. This, in turn, led to less work for the cottier and the start of the eradication of small holdings by the more 'progressive' land owners. The era of 'the eviction' was just beginning and between 1839 and 1843 over 20,000 ejectments were carried out. By 1835, over two million Irish people were without regular employment.

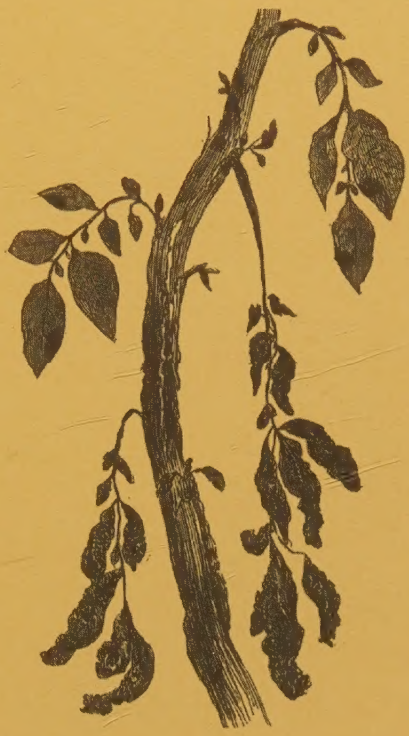
ARRIVAL OF THE POTATO BLIGHT IN 1845

Destitution was already a fact of life for many when the unthinkable happened and potato blight appeared in 1845.
By then, the potato was the most extensively cultivated crop from two million acres or one-third of the tilled land of Ireland during the 1840's. Three million people consumed little else and together with buttermilk, the potato provided a diet rich in vitamin C, which made the Irish one of the most healthy, robust and tallest races in Europe. Soon, they were to become its most wretched.

Phytophtora infestans, the potato blight fungus originated in America in 1843, spread to Belgium in a potato consignment

and, borne by south-east winds, eventually appeared in Dublin on the 20th August, 1845. Yet, all seemed fine during that Summer of 1845 along the western seaboard as countless lazy-beds, filled with ripening potatoes, created little patches of ordered greenery amidst the maze of stone walls and bouldered fields. "Lazy" is an unfortunate misnomer to apply to these narrow cultivation ridges, for toil and sweat went into their making on these rocky landscapes. The lush greening of the potato stalks promised much now, but unseen by human eye, the balmy south-east winds were bringing death from Europe. The dreaded blight spores alighted on the greening stalks, and by Autumn, the rotting vegetation was giving off a fearful stench as tubers blackened and died in their ordered beds. Patricia Kilroy in her book, 'The Story of Connemara' best describes the scene that followed as the frightened people rushed to open furrow after furrow and found only 'jellied rot'. With the terrible smell of putrefaction filling their nostrils, they saw the whole year's supply of food destroyed before their eyes. It was, as she writes, "Like China without rice".

Counties Waterford, Monaghan, Antrim, and in the West, County Clare, were most affected by this initial onslaught of the dreaded blight. In Connacht, there was a destruction rate of nearly 50 % of the potato crop in Roscommon, up to 45 % in Counties Galway, Sligo and Leitrim and between 30 and 35 % in Mayo.



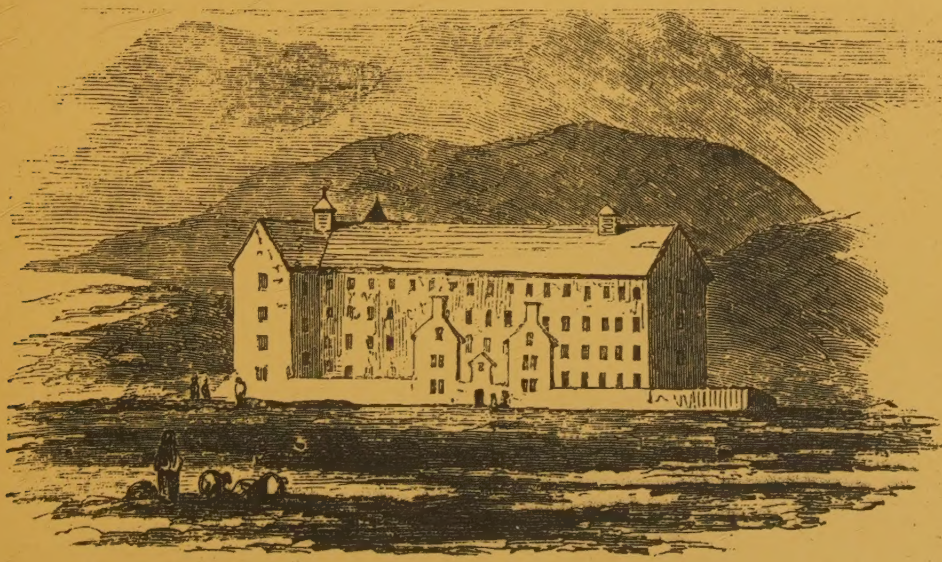
Diseased Stem

Due to the late arrival of the blight, however, only about one third of the potato crop was destroyed overall, and the entire yield dropped from the 1844 figure of about 15 million tons to 10 million tons. As 14 million tons were needed for human and animal consumpton, as well as seed potatoes for the following year, it was obvious that a disaster was unfolding. With about 15% of the crop destroyed in storage, 1846 promised to be even worse.

A Connemara Cabin after Eviction *(Illustrated London News)*

GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS - THE WORKHOUSE SYSTEM

By then, however, the government had forseen the need to install an early form of a public welfare programme to cater for the ever-gathering storm of destitution. They had already made a start way back in 1703 with the Dublin Workhouse Act, followed by Cork in 1735, which saw the first workhouses erected to house the destitute. In 1838, things were much worse, and an Act 'for the more Effective Relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland', which enshrined the principle that local property must support local poverty, was enacted and 130 Poor Law Unions were established throughout the country to aid the destitute. Property owners and certain rent payers were obliged to pay a "Poor Rate" ordered by local Grand Juries towards the maintenance of the destitute in their Union workhouse, which was administered by a local Board of Guardians. The 5th June, 1839 saw guardians elected in Galway, then in Gort, Ballinasloe, Tuam, Clifden and Loughrea, followed by Oughterard, Portumna, Mountbellew and Glenamaddy in 1849. In Mayo five Unions were formed in Ballinrobe, Castlebar, Ballina, Westport and Swinford. Others were formed in Sligo, Roscommon, Castlerea, Boyle, Carrick-on-Shannon, Mohill and Manorhamilton in the Connacht area.



The Workhouse at Clifden *(Illustrated London News)*

"We have it is true been favoured in Galway with a cargo of Indian meal, which has been duly lodged in the stores of Mr. Flynn, a gentleman by whom we are assured that, so strongly built is the concern, it is impregnable to any attacks that may be made upon it in the event of a popular outbreak. But we cannot see the wisdom of locking up grain until June or July when the poor are famishing in April or May; it is wanted at this very moment and in order to meet the calamity, should be distributed at once"

Galway Mercury, April 24, 1846

BOARD OF WORKS

Another body formed by the government to fight poverty in Ireland was the Board of Works set up in 1831. Grand Juries composed of committees of local land owners were established to submit proposals to the Board for public works to be carried out in their districts such as road constructions and drainage schemes. As 1845 drew to a close, the Dyke embankment and road leading to Terryland in Galway city as well as Threadneedle Road (*Bóthar na Mine* - 'the Meal Road', at Salthill) were almost completed. The sound of rock breaking and road construction work throughout the West instilled some hope as winter fell. It was not enough.

FOOD DEPOTS

With the drop of one third in the potato crop, food prices rose sharply towards the end of 1845, however, and as the Corn Laws levied heavy taxes on foreign crops entering Britain, the British Prime minister, Sir Robert Peel, secretly purchased £100,000 (£185,000 in reality) worth of Indian corn (maize) from America seeking to reduce the gathering distress in Ireland. To distribute the food from depots, a Relief Commission was set up by Peel in November, 1845 with Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, overseeing the work. One of these food depots, thanks to the urgings of the Rev. John Darcy, was established in St.

Relief works at Dyke Road, Galway City

Relief works at Threadneedle Road, Galway City

"Threadneedle Road was known in Irish as Bóthar na Mine, "The Oatmeal Road" because the workmen involved used their wages to buy oatmeal to feed their families.

GALWAY MARKET - THIS DAY

A poor supply of wheat at 7s. 9d. to 1s. 3d. per cwt. No oats offered for sale, and only a few cart-loads of potatoes for the most part diseased - 1½d. per stone.

Galway Mercury, August 15, 1846

THE POTATO CROP

Our accounts from all parts of the country represent the potato crop as utterly destroyed. Mr John Murphy of Abbeygate-street, has called at this office to state that on Tuesday last, he had twenty-seven feet dug out of his land at Ballybane, and did not get one stone of sound potatoes, although on the Thursday before four-fifths of them were good. In truth, the failure is universal.

Galway Mercury, August 29, 1846

Augustine Street in Galway city and meal was also distributed in such towns as Roscommon, Castlerea, Boyle and Strokestown. Coastguards also distributed meal along the western seaboard all the way to Donegal. It was not enough.

LOCAL RELIEF WORKS

As well, some 648 Local Relief Committees were set up, consisting of officials and clergy, who eventually distributed the food free when the famine worsened in 1846 and much of the population found itself unable to pay for food. More employment was needed, and while many landlords started their own work schemes, such as drainage and wall building, the main trust of famine relief in March 1846 was the provision of public works employing the following procedures. The local Grand Juries applied for government grants, the Board of Works vetted the schemes proposed, while successful applicants for work on such schemes were granted work tickets by the local Relief Committees. Road works and drainage were the most common schemes and up to 100,000 were initially employed reaching 390,000 by the end of 1846 and rising to 750,000 in 1847. Problems arose, however, because some counties received very little public works' money, (Galway got £64,000), delays occured in starting the work, greed was rampant, and private farm work gave way to better paid public versions. Not surprising, the election of a new Whig Prime Minister, Sir John Russell, saw attempts to wind down such works except in extreme cases of distress. With the near complete failure of the potato crop in 1846 (down to three million tons from which most of the seed crop for 1847 was eaten), and prices rising even higher, extra relief measures were needed to augment the public works schemes, with half of the cost of the latter now having to be borne by local Irish rates according to 'The Labour Rate Act' passed in the Autumn of 1846.

Although nearly £5 million were spent on relief works over the Winter of 1846-7, the coldest weather in living memory only added to the disaster now unfolding as 'Black 47' dawned. By January of that year, although over 500,000 were employed on relief work, another 400,000 starving workers were seeking work for a daily wage of one shilling when three times that amount was needed to feed a family. Crime against property became rampant with yearly trials doubling to nearly 40,000 by the end of the decade. Galway jail, for instance, saw the number of 'vagrants' imprisoned in 1844 increase from just three persons to nearly five-hundred in 1848, while the Bridewell in Clifden, built to hold eighteen persons now overflowed with sixty-nine inmates. Jail or transportation was obviously preferable to starvation for an increasingly destitute population. As a result, food rations were cut to make prison less attractive.

Gate Lodge of the Galway Workhouse/Central Hospital in 1956, before its demolition. *(Courtesy Fr. James Mitchell)*

The Swinford Workhouse front & gates erected 1841 *(Courtesy Mr. Bernard O'Hara)*

WORKHOUSES OVERFLOW

Obviously, the workhouse system now bore the brunt of the expanding calamity when thousands of Irish families found themselves destitute as 1847 spread its cold early months across a famished western seaboard. Seed potatoes had been eaten by the starving lower classes, and fishing tackle of the poorer fishing communities, such as the Claddagh fishing village outside Galway city, as well as hundreds of its famous Claddagh rings, had been pawned for food. By February, 1847, the Poor Law system was beginning to collapse as thousands sought refuge in the country's 112 workhouses, already crammed to bursting point with 116,000 inmates. Ballina workhouse was overflowing with 1,200 inmates, while the smaller version in Swinford was turning away a daily number of 200, because it was already filled to capacity with 720 inmates. Other examples of gross overcrowding included Castlerea workhouse with 1,250 paupers, Clifden with 800 (500 too many), but most pressure seemed to fall on the Galway city workhouse. Originally built in the usual H-plan of George Wilkinson to hold 800, it reached 1,302 in 1847 with many more clamouring for entry. Dr. James P. Murray in his book, 'Galway: A Medico Social History' tells of the frantic efforts by the authorities to accommodate them:

"In December 1847 it was reported that 313 paupers were seeking admission but the Workhouse was already overcrowded. Captain Hilliard took over a store in Newtownsmyth to accommodate between 300 and 400 children, though he appreciated that it was far from suitable. An auxiliary workhouse was commissioned at Dangan, and the following year Major McKie converted a corn store on Merchants Road into an auxiliary workhouse, with accommodation for 1,000 people. During 1848, further auxiliary workhouses were commissioned at Barna and at West House in St. Helen's Street....

The Galway Guardians maintained a Foundling Home at Parkavera and, in December, the temporary Fever Hospital at Moycullen was converted to an Auxiliary Workhouse especially for children. Straw Lodge, at the back of the Workhouse, was also used to accommodate children."

Despite this gross overcrowding and lack of space, the 'spacious and elegant building' of the County Infirmary, now the County Buildings on Prospect Hill, held fast to its rule of dealing only with 'hospital' cases and no more than forty 'non-contagious' patients were treated daily there during the height of the famine.

SOUP KITCHENS

By March, 1849, the total number of inmates in all of Galway city workhouses was 3,310. The picture was the same all along the western seaboard, (Clifden Union used Bunowen Castle as an auxillery workhouse), but conditions would have been more desperate, except for the passing of the 'Act for the Temporary Relief of Destitute Persons of Ireland' in February, 1847 (The Soup Kitchen Act).

Soup Kitchen Ticket

A new Relief Commission was founded and through this Act it proposed a two-fold approach through the Irish Poor Law system to dealing with the Irish Famine. This entailed establishing temporary feeding facilities (soup kitchens) until September of that year in place of Relief Works and then instituting Outdoor Relief, ie. instead of going into workhouses, the destitute could stay in their homes and collect food. The problem now was that all of this had to be financed from local rates - Irish property had to pay for Irish poverty. It was bound to fail.

The soup kitchen system took some time to implement, however, which caused great hardships to over 200,000 let go from the Public Works programme by June of 1847.

BARNA SOUP KITCHEN

We feel great pleasure in bearing testimony to the admirable working of the soup kitchen which has been lately established at the Quay of Barna, for the relief of the poor in that distressed locality. By means of this unpretending little institution, famine is averted from perhaps the most utterly destitute population in any part of Ireland. Multitudes are supplied - hundreds of them gratuitously - each with a quart of meat soup, such as no man, no matter what his rank might be, could be ashamed of at his private table, and with a large cake of substantial, unadulterated home-made bread, - as much superior to what one usually gets in baker's shops as the piety and charity of the humble Sisters of Mercy, by whom it is made, are above the sordid, avaricious spirit of the mercenary huxters who traffic and fatten upon the misery of the poor. We would be glad to see such soup kitchens as this, and under the management of the same hands, scattered all through the country. The efficacy of the establishment does infinite credit to the Rev. Mr. Daly and the Ladies of St. Vincent's Convent, under whose care and superintendance it has become the medium of affording so much relief to the wretched people of the district. We very much doubt the ability of the French cook, M. Soyer, to manufacture better soup than what is dispensed amongst the poor of Barna by the humble Sisters of the Order of Mercy. If the government kept the Frenchman to themselves, with all his receipts and all his nostrums, and sent us the means of making soup instead of importing a quack for the purpose of teaching us how to make it, we would be far more obliged by them, and our poor would be much more likely to be better provided for. Of all the pieces of folly ever perpetrated towards this unfortunate country by any government, Whig or Tory, the sending over of this French cook to open our eyes to the mystery of soup making, is the most egregious and insulting. It out-Herods the mission of Sir. R. Routh himself. The Barna Soup Kitchen began to work on the 10th instant., and up to the 19th, 2,433 were fed gratis.

Galway Mercury, March 20, 1847

New Relief Committees, nearly 2,000 in all, were established and by mid-August over three million people were being fed daily by the State. In all, £1.7 million was spent, a sum levied on local rates. For this, each person got a soup plate of stirabout composed of two-thirds Indian meal and one third rice, initially uncooked, then cooked, as well as some bread. By July, soup-kitchens, many privately organised by the Quakers along the Western seaboard, who spent £200,000 in Ireland, were in operation. Catholic clergy were the main benefactors, however, and in Galway the great Fr. Peter Daly fed 2,000 each day at his home on the Moycullen Road. In Galway city, Dominican, Presentation and Mercy Order nuns fed 4,300 daily, while as many as 1,000 boys were nourished by the Patrician Brothers, who, dispensed more than a quarter of a million free breakfasts in 1848 thanks mainly to the efforts of Brother Paul O'Connor. In all, 16 soup kitchens operated in or about Galway city during 'Black 47'.

Portrait of Fr. Peter Daly

FOREIGN AID

Other private organisations helped also such as the British Association which donated £470,000 including a donation of £2,500 from Queen Victoria. In all, some £1 million were donated from private sources compared to the mere £8 million spent by the government between 1845-49. Other examples of private aid, include donations from America such as the 4,000 barrels of breadstuffs, which arrived in Galway Bay in August, 1847 on board the *Saone* from Dudley Persse in New York. A Quaker ship followed in September and, according to Dr. James Murray:

"With these large donations of food and the provision of outdoor relief,..... the worst of the famine, per se, was over in Galway City."

In July 1847, over 70% of the Galway Union were on outdoor relief and in other parts of County Galway it was approaching 100% of the population.

OUTDOOR RELIEF

Outdoor Relief, once the soup-kitchens closed down in September, 1847, allowed the able-bodied to work and to collect food for their families, instead of having them enter the local workhouse. By February, 1848, over 445,000 people were in receipt,

a sum which rose to over 800,000 by June of that year. It gradually broke down, however, when local rates failed to cover the massive costs involved. Landowners as well as tradesmen in the towns simply could not afford the rising rate in the £ (it reached 10 shillings in the £ in the Westport Union) to finance the scheme. With many Unions becoming bankrupt, dozens of Boards of Guardians were dissolved and replaced with officials, who cut costs. Other factors also lead to the breakdown of the Outdoor Relief programme. Tenants occupying land over quarter of an acre (Gregory Clause) were now debarred from getting help and many left their little holdings for the workhouse. As well, landlords became responsible to pay rates for all their tenants paying less than £4 in rent, so evictions began in earnest.

EVICTIONS

Between 1849 and 1854 almost 50,000 families were evicted including 3,000 tenants from the Pakenham Mahon estate in Co. Roscommon. The hillsides of the other Connacht counties also echoed to the cries of the dispossessed. In Mayo, Lord Lucan cleared 2,000 unfortunate tenants from his lands about Ballinrobe, while in County Clare, Captain A. Kennedy, a Poor Law inspector, became so incensed at the cruelty of the evictions in his district that he felt disposed to shoot the first landord he met. As the rate of evictions increased, the dispossessed sought refuge in scailpíns or scailps, hastily made shelters in ditches or bogs, where rain and wind ended many a family's plight. Others sought refuge in the already overcrowded workhouses and failure

American Flour, Indian Meal and Corn, Farm Seeds, &c., &c., &c.

R. D. PERSSE

Is now landing ex Barque "Eliza," James Humfries, Master DIRECT from NEW YORK, 2,500 Barrels of Best Western Canal Flour, 700 Barrels Yellow Indian Meal, 100 tonnes Indian Corn in Bags; which, with his Supply of Farm SEEDS, HOUSE, and MALTING COALS will be sold on the most moderate terms at his STORES, MERCHANTS ROAD and BACK-STREET

Galway Mercury, 27th March, 1847

The Day after the Ejectment

saw them die in the streets of nearby towns. Five per day perished in the pavement channels of Bohermore Parish in Galway city, where a local priest also mentioned that people were living on nettles, charlock and other plants. Ominously, he also mentioned that fever and dysentry had broken out in the city.

FAMINE-INDUCED DISEASES

Disease now killed more people than starvation. This, of course, came about by thousands of people cramming into workhouses where bad sanitation and living conditions led to many dying from 'famine induced diseases' such as typhus and replapsing fever, which were spread by body lice, while dysentery and even cholera spread from contaminated water sources. Many deaths were reported from workhouses, more than 300 in the Carrick-on-Shannon workhouse, while Helen Litton reported:

"In May (1847) it was announced that fever continued to rage with unabated fury at Castlebar. 'Sligo is a plague spot; disease in every street, and of the worst kind'. 'Fever is committing fearful ravages in Ballindine, Ballinrobe, Claremorris, Westport, Ballina and Belmullet. From Roscommon, the news came that the increase of fever was truly awful; the hospitals were full and applicants were daily refused admission."

In Galway, as elsewhere, temporary accommodation in fever sheds was set up all around the county, and extra structures in Galway workhouse augmented the fever hospital part of the complex. Nearby, beside the appropriately named "Beggars' Bridge", the fever hospital, now U.C.G's mens' club, had accommodation for 40 patients, but more than 300 were treated during the height of the cholera crises of 1848. As the famine took hold, one sees the admission figure of 239 to Loughrea Fever Hospital in 1846 rise to 1,842 in 1849, as being typical as what was happening throughout the country, which saw 192,937 die from fever. In April of 1849, 300 cases of fever were recorded in the workhouse in Carrick-on-Shannon with the weekly deaths amounting to over 50. While over 600 died in Galway City during the cholera outbreak in 1849, over 3,000

Galway Fever Hospital - now UCG's Mens' Club

Driving Cattle for rent between Ouchterard and Galway *(London Illustrated News, December 29, 1849)*

had perished from it in Ballinasloe by August of that year. The heavy famine toll was reflected in a huge decline the population of Connacht which fell from 1,418,859 to 1,010,031 between 1841-51, a loss of 408,828 people. While Galway showed the biggest decline of 118,514, just 4,126 more than Mayo, its percentage decrease of 26.92 was the lowest in Connacht compared to 31.61 for Roscommon, the highest, and to 28.81, the average for the province as a whole.

EMIGRATION

Part of this huge decline came from emigration when many chose the terrible journey by coffin ship to escape the famine. Some 22,000 were assisted to leave by their landlords, a small proportion of the one million or so who emigrated between 1846 and 1852.

In 1847, it is estimated that 230,000 went to America and Australia with 100,000 sailing for Canada of which one sixth died due to the

FOR THE FLOURISHING CITY OF

NEW-YORK

(UNITED STATES).

The Splendid New Brig,
"ALICE", OF GALWAY,
500 tons burden, John McKay, Commander
Will sail for the above Port on the 12th January, 1847,
(Wind and Weather permitting).

IN consequence of the increased demand for Agricultural produce in the United States, from the failure of the Potatoes in this Country, the demand for Labour next Spring will be more than double what it has been hitherto, and Wages will, no doubt, be high in proportion. Emigrants will therefore do well to secure a passage by the above Vessel, as they will arrive when Spring Work is commencing and fall in for immediate Employment.

The above Vessel will be fitted up in a superior manner and the Captain, who is long accustomed to the American Trade, will afford every necessary information to Passengers.

Each emigrant will be supplied with one pound of meal or bread per day, according to Act of Parliament, and abundance of Fuel and Water.

As the Vessel will be dispatched positively on the day named, early application is necessary to R. D. Persse, Merchants-road; Messrs Rush and Palmer, Dominick-street; R. N. Somerville, Eyre-square, and Edmund Duffy, Back-street, Galway

N.B. This vessel will be succeeded by the Brig "RED WING", Yorke, Commander, burden 400 Tons, to sail in FEBRUARY; by the Barque "ALBION", Wallace, commander, burden 600 tons, to sail in MARCH; and by the Barque "BARBARA", Mackey, Commander, 800 Tons burden, to sail in APRIL next. Those are all First Class Vessels, and commanded by most experienced Masters, who will pay every attention to the comfort of the Passengers during the voyage.

For Passage apply to R. D. Persse, Galway.

Galway Mercury, January, 1847

terrible conditions on board ships ill designed for such use. Marketing such trips was widespread, however, and migrants were enticed to sail for Quebec from places such as Innisgoula, situated according to a contemporary advertisement 'near the interesting Seaport Towns of Newport and Westport' where one could embark on 'the Large, Splendid, Newly Copper-bottomed and Fast Sailing Packet Ship, *Argyle* '. As a bonus, each passenger was promised one pound weight of the finest 'breadstuffs' daily. Galway harbour too was often the scene of tearful farewells, as when the

Famine Grave at Bushypark

Clarence left in April, 1848 for New York with 103 mostly famine escapees on board. One wonders what fate awaited Kitty McGrath, age 16, described simply as 'spinster', in the ship's manifest, as she sailed alone for the New World.

FAMINE GRAVES

For a million people, however, there was no escape and the many harrowing newspaper and eye-witness accounts of the Irish famine deaths sear the very soul. People died in their thousands by the side of the road and ditch, their mouths green with grass and weed. Families prayed and died together, their little houses tossed in about them by neighbours fearful of the spread of the famine disease. Many were buried where they fell, while others interred their loved ones and marked their final resting places with simple crude stones, many of which still peep out at us today from unkept or disused graveyards, silent memorials of the 19th century holocaust. Others found final rest in vast communal famine graves, such as *Poll an Churtha* in Oughterard, or *Poll na n-Dob* in Ennistymon, cast off as mere numbers from nearby workhouse or fever hospital ward. Few escaped the terror of death just then, but Rev. Fr. Martin Jennings in his Swinford Workhouse article recalls one such incidence:

"From that period comes the dread memory of the mass grave in Swinford workhouse when about six hundred were buried without 'coffin or sermon or anything denoting respect for the dead' and many of them had died outside the walls. Patsy Cox, later the town crier and bell man, as a young child had been certified dead and put into the pit but a hand movement showed life and he was revived and nursed back to health."

Today, some of these famine graves are commemorated in a proper way and one need go no further than the little Bushypark churchyard on the outskirts of Galway city to see what can be done. Swinford also honours its famine dead and the vast green mound behind the former administrative building of its workhouse is a silent memorial to the six hundred or so souls that lie beneath its lush green Mayo sward.

AFTER THE FAMINE

By 1850, when the worst of the Great Famine was over, with a million people dead and a million Irish hearts beating on a foreign shore, a different Ireland faced into the second half of the 19th century. Connacht lost over a quarter of its population in the five terrible years, with Galway, Mayo and Sligo showing the highest death rates. The number of farms under five acres had been halved, while many of Connacht's helping landlords were saved from bankruptcy only through the intervention of the Encumbered Estates Act of 1849, which allowed those ruined by the famine, such as the Darcys in Connemara, to sell their estates without first having to pay off their debts. The famine also destroyed the old native way of farming, and the clachan/rundale system with its vast cottier class went into terminal decline. All along the western seaboard, Irish-speaking communities were decimated and the native language suffered a mortal blow. Amid the terrible years of the famine, however, people in the West, outside of Galway city, showed the greatest submission as noted by Charles Neilson of the Killala Parochial Relief Committee when he heard people mutter, "Why should we murmur, it is the will of God?"

After the famine, however, hearts hardened and resistence to the land tenure system grew with an actual uprising taking place in Ballingarry in Tipperary followed by the assassination in November, 1847 of Major Denis Mahon of Strokestown, County Roscommon, one of Ireland's most notorious landlords. This change in attitude of the native survivor of the Great Famine, led eventually to the Land War instigated by Michael Davitt in 1879 and the Fight for Freedom in the early part of the 20th century. Many of the 'Big Houses', seen as symbols of repression during and after the famine, were burnt to the ground. It was a short but bloody step to Independence.

EPITAPH

Looking back at the last great famine in European history, one wonders how the government of the richest and most powerful empire allowed a million of its citizens to perish so vividly and so swiftly in its second homeland. Murmurs about the Irish holocaust still flit upon the wind, however, and hover gently over quiet grassy corners in Ireland. They seem to ask the question, 'why?' and then blow silently away.

SONG OF THE FAMINE

(From the Fireman)

Knee deep in the furrow
The peasant stands,
And he wringeth in sorrow
His toil-worn hands;
And wan and woe smitten
His forehead - for care
And famine have written
His misery there.

He hath delved and upturned
Of his garden a rood,
Where blighted and burned
Lies his rot-stricken food;
The earth he had riven,
Its rottenness baring-
He looketh to Heaven,
Heartbroken, despairing.

Now enter his cottage,
Where starving in common,
Lie shivering dotage
And suffering women;
Yet pause if you cower -
By contagion are scared;
Here fevers devour
What famine hath spared.

For drink hoarsely craving
On the damp ground reclining,
See writhing and raving
In the pestilence pining,
'Til death, hailed with pleasure,
Blackened corpses, now strews 'em
His child - his heart's treasure -
And the wife of his bosom.

Oh, God, in deep mystery
Thy Providence veiling,
The peasants' sad history,
Shall it waken no feeling? -
Shall our land be by famine
And pestilence trod?
Deus vetat - oh, amen !
Forbib it, oh, God!

Famine Poem - Galway Mercury, September 5, 1846

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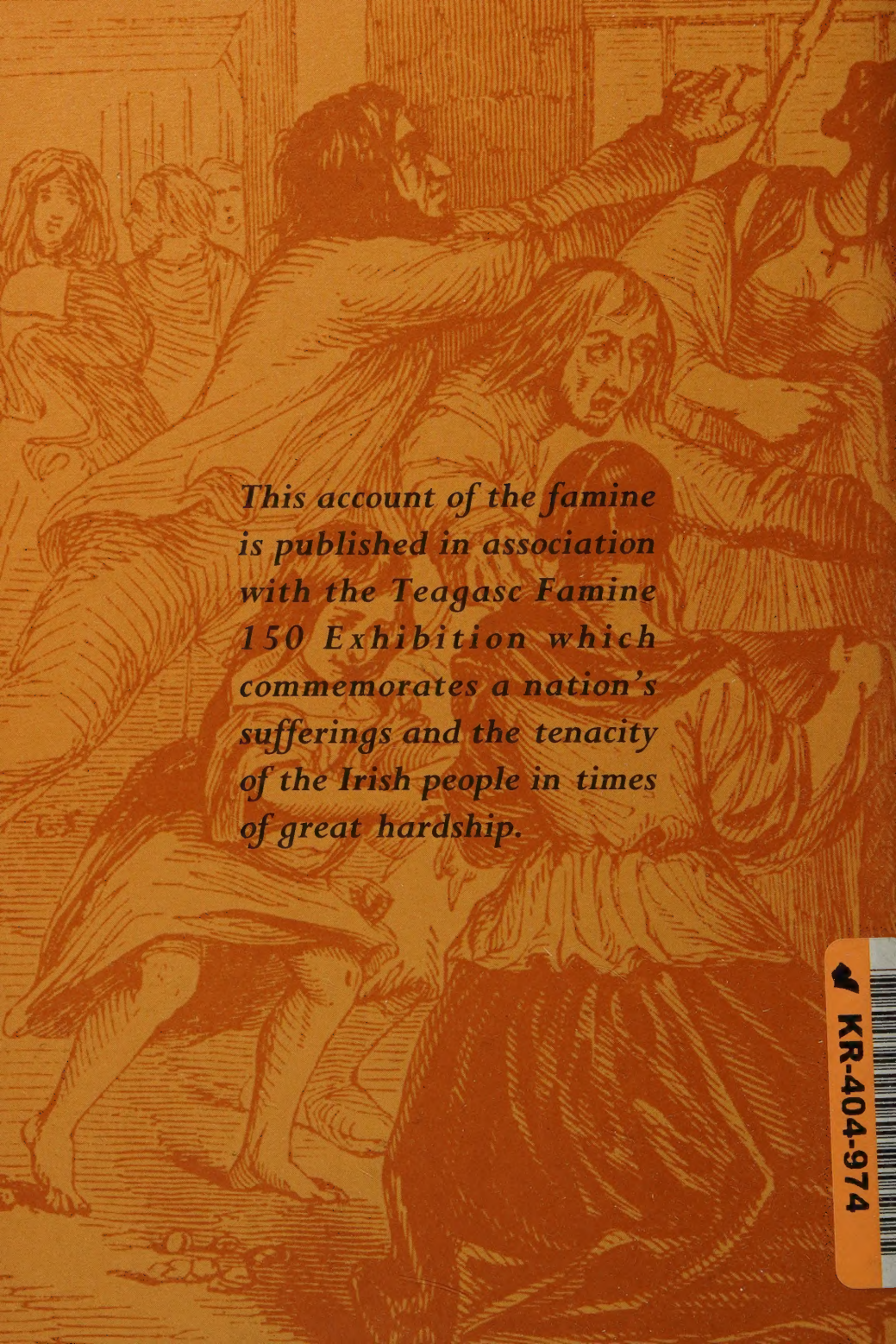

This account of the famine is published in association with the Teagasc Famine 150 Exhibition which commemorates a nation's sufferings and the tenacity of the Irish people in times of great hardship.

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